

## **Imperialism 21: Heeding and Abandoning History**

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### Imperialism 21: Heeding and Abandoning History

The United States enters a new millennium as the most loved and hated country in the world, undoubtedly the single superpower with a monopoly of strength across all dimensions of global influence. In less than 230 years, a blip on the radar of civilization, the United States has risen from obscurity to prominence, seemingly through foreign policy consistent with its anticolonial roots. In reality, American actions have been both colonial and imperial at times. In the last century, as global colonialism has faded, America has sought advantageous imperial influence to base its armed forces abroad. History has shown that complex agreements and host-nation dynamics accompanying these basing strategies often cripple military operations. Today, in light of perceived threats, the U.S. military should abandon forward basing that addresses historical threats or American military posture at the conclusion of past conflicts, and seek to establish sovereign or mobile basing that can be directly controlled.

To understand current American foreign policy and forge new policy in the age of global terrorism, one must realize that in its short history the United States has vacillated between colonial and imperial policies. As national interests changed, the foreign policy followed. Today, the world seems smaller as borders are recognized in international circles, economies go global, and media and transportation technologies close the miles between nations. Colonialism's benefits have been made forever obsolete by these advances. However, as nations naturally seek to influence each other in the ongoing quest for relative power, imperialism will never completely die.

#### The Rise of American Colonialism

A cursory review of periodicals, editorials, and history often reveals sloppy use of the terms "colonialism" and "imperialism." They may appear interchangeable, but they are very dif-

ferent policies. Colonialism involves the “maintenance of...dominance” over “an extended period of time,” whereas imperialism may simply imply “powerful nations (that)...influence weaker nations” (McGraw-Hill, 2004). A nation can be imperial without being colonial, but not vice versa.

From America's revolutionary roots grew an understandable disdain for colonialism. With the benefit of geography, the fledgling United States could afford to be isolationist as Europe continued the scramble for land in the Americas. In 1823, President Monroe asserted that Europe should conduct its business at home and likewise leave America to its side of the Atlantic, boldly stating that the Western Hemisphere was off limits to European colonial interests (Monroe Doctrine, 1823).

That didn't prevent the United States from expanding its own influence, however. On the heels of this anticolonial statement, America looked west under the pressures of population growth and economic challenges. To justify expansionist policies and not simultaneously appear hypocritical, Americans rallied around a sense of moral duty and mission to spread democracy and American values. America's *Manifest Destiny*, labeled as such in the 1840s due to a perception that it was an inevitable providence, would lead to colonization of Native American lands to the Pacific Ocean, all under the auspices of national interest (Manifest Destiny, n.d.). Even after the West was won, efforts were made to justify the aggressive expansion. Frederick Jackson Turner's *Frontier Thesis* validated America's expansion as synonymous with America's true character and identity (U.S. Interventionism, 2002). This would not be the last time Americans, or foreign naysayers for that matter, would cite this call to democratize as an impetus, or rationalization, for American imperialistic policy.

America's true colors were shown at the end of the nineteenth century. The United States began dabbling in imperial activity after the Civil War with American troops in Argentina, Nicaragua, Japan, Uruguay, and China (U.S. Interventionism, 2002). Many Americans felt that the path to global prominence was parallel to colonial successes of the European powers they had broken from only a century before. The conclusion of the short Spanish-American War left a landscape ripe for American colonialism, this time away from the North American continent. After the Spanish-American War, the United States retained the Philippines and Guam and annexed the Hawaiian Islands in a short time, riding a wave of popular support for expansionism among American citizens.

Ironically, while popular American opinions supported American colonial ventures, European colonial thinking that had dominated European power circles for centuries was gradually replaced by an imperial mindset. The European race to colonize the world was originally based on reputation, resource access, and simply denying the prize to other countries. Even though the great African land grab went as late as 1935 with Italy's conquering of Ethiopia, European powers retreated to an imperial stance in the 1900s as country after country in Africa gained independence (Western Imperialism, n.d.). To date, many are still affiliated with their former European rulers through ties, mainly economic, that benefit the imperial powers.

In just over 100 years American attitude towards colonialism was reversed because it supported the national interests of the time. Enjoying an increase in international stature, economic power, and military positioning, the United States bettered its own position and security through acquisition of land in North America and abroad. These century-old diplomatic, military, and economic gains support the diplomatic, information, military, and economic, or D-I-M-E tenets of U.S. National Security Strategy today (National Security Strategy, 2002).

The Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 set in place a landmark imperialistic policy still exercised by the United States today. President Roosevelt sought to justify American intervention in the Western Hemisphere by asserting that American moral principles were ahead of international law, and that certain egregious situations “may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power” (Roosevelt Corollary, 1904). This proactive policy with respect to influence, intervention, and preemptive military action, when expanded from the Western Hemisphere to the global stage, preceded U.S. military action abroad in the twentieth century, including involvement in Vietnam, and Operations DESERT STORM and IRAQI FREEDOM. In fact, American imperialism was rampant in the first 30 years of the century, as the United States sent troops to South and Latin American countries for police actions over 30 times (Roosevelt Corollary, 1904). This groundbreaking policy was a harbinger of the modern premise that “America will act against...emerging threats before they are fully formed” (NSS, 2002), which will guide American military presence and disposition in the Global War on Terrorism.

In apparent contradiction, American foreign policy in the twentieth century also showed resistance to both imperialism and colonialism. The Cold War centered on countering the imperialistic spread of communism, sometimes to the point of armed conflict, as in Korea and Vietnam. With respect to the Vietnam conflict, American aversion to colonialism caused an initial hesitance to assist French forces in Indochina, as this would have implied U.S. support of a French colonial venture.

A historical review of American foreign policy demonstrates that, for the United States to remain a global power and support national security interests, it has periodically changed its views regarding colonialism and imperialism in context of the challenges and opportunities at the

particular time. From America's short history the only common theme is adaptability. The United States must embrace a foreign policy that looks nothing like the colonialism or imperialism found in history books.

#### Prospects for an American Empire

As the preeminent global power today, the United States could look to the successes enjoyed by the European empires that flourished before the twentieth century through plundering weaker civilizations and gathering territory. Although colonization today would be met with international outrage, it is feasible that the United States could use its military and economic power to build a sizable empire of its choosing. As far-fetched as it sounds, the advantages captured through colonial or imperial ventures would be numerous, including, but certainly not limited to, resource control and forward military basing.

The crumbling of Britain's empire, however, shows that the costs of maintaining rule and administering governments and economies abroad are high (Ferguson, 2002). Besides the obvious fact that aggressive colonization flies in the face of America's founding beliefs, it would never achieve acceptance in domestic or international circles. In fact, the global consensus is resoundingly against colonialism. The right of individual countries to have self-determination, free of domination or exploitation from foreign powers, was internationally accepted in 1960 when the United Nations issued its formal Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (General Assembly, 1960).

### Today's High-stakes Global Environment

Isolationism is not an option, nor has it been for at least a century. America's geographic advantage granted by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is all but gone. The United States must be engaged, international, and forward thinking in its endeavors. This applies to all facets of national interests, and no less to America's military stance as the potential consequences of outdated policies have dramatically intensified. As the stakes are raised, the list of likely enemies, and their location, is less definable now than at any time in American history. Today many nations have weapons with international, if not intercontinental, reach. In addition, the possession of weapons of mass destruction by known and unknown powers adds to the potential for rapid, global military conflict with catastrophic results. In the Global War on Terrorism, the United States must not only position itself globally, but also correctly, so that preemptive action is feasible if needed.

Failure to engage in today's global economy would undermine the national power and influence of the United States or any modern nation. All countries, from impoverished, lesser-developed countries to the global economic powerhouses of the G7, are consumers for a broad range of commodities and resources. Modern nations with high standards of living have a correspondingly high dependence on, and vulnerability to, the economic leverage of poor nations that may be militarily weak. Economic imperialism is crucial to securing resources, maintaining favorable trade, and calming America's business market amidst the daily turmoil of global terrorism. Economic imperialism is of no less importance to the United States than military imperialism. As an instrument of national power, it can reap great benefits outside the business realm by complementing America's military imperial policies.



### Imperialism Reconsidered

It is more important than ever that the United States rethink the way it bases its forces outside its own borders. Just as America should not plan to fight the last war, it should not invest its time, planning process, and global leverage on outdated forward basing. The United States should not be hesitant to unload current basing agreements with countries that have proven skittish or unreliable when it matters. Rigid forward basing suggests that one knows the location from which the enemy is likely to strike. Current overseas basing does not support U.S. goals with respect to the Global War on Terrorism. On the contrary, it reflects the dated posture of a post-World War II military footprint or Cold War defensive position.

The U.S. position as the lone global superpower should be exploited to provide an American advantage. Establishing foreign basing requires complex agreements that must be seen as being beneficial to host nations. As the United States restructures its basing needs to thinner, less permanent footprints, it should seek agreements that are advantageous in more than simply military ways. Just as cities vie for a football stadium or lucrative assembly plant, third world countries or developing nations that are hungry for American aid may be willing to strike basing deals that greatly benefit the United States. As a result, the United States can minimize concessions and still satisfy the need to establish basing rights in key geographic regions.

As a possible example of things to come, recent European Command visits to Sao Tome in the African Gulf of Guinea show how a fresh basing agreement might work. A small, poor country like Sao Tome will go to extreme lengths to attract U.S. dollars, in this case by allowing U.S. military basing, a new naval port, and access to the Gulf of Guinea's oil-rich waters (Worldwide reorientation, 2003). From such a base U.S. forces could monitor and respond to

terrorist havens in Africa and conduct humanitarian assistance missions that have become so prevalent on the continent.

The United States will need to temper any reductions, closures, or additions to foreign basing with standing commitments such as those in Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. As long as those commitments exist, traditional forces will need to be within reasonable response range. In those two situations, justifying a shift of American forces to that region should not be difficult in light of current terrorism and piracy in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. Establishing agreements with less-developed countries that are willing to offer beneficial agreements in return for American assistance and global exposure can improve U.S. proximity to terrorist havens while bolstering diplomatic, informational, and economic national interests.

#### Expeditionary Armed Forces

It is evident that U.S. military leaders are starting to think of the American Armed Forces as an adaptable, quick reaction force for global challenges of varying length. There is no shortage of point papers in the days following the onset of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM to support that contention. At operational levels the changes are coming to fruition, hurried into reality by an unrelenting operational tempo as the respective Services find ways to wean themselves of basing dependencies that have proven cumbersome and unreliable. In the post 9/11 era every Service wishes to be expeditionary in nature, furnishing rapid response capabilities to the crisis du jour.

The U.S. Army, faced with immense logistic challenges in any operation, forwardly acknowledges that changes are needed to deploy more quickly. At the strategic level, the Army admits that it “cannot remain static, trapped in a web of...no longer relevant policies, procedures, and processes” (United States Army, 2003) in order to truly be expeditionary. As an example of

potential future changes, the Army's 1999 Strategic Planning Guidance detailed requirements for a light, tailorable Stryker Brigade Combat Team. Stryker assets, capable of deploying quickly with an integrated command structure to accomplish a broad range of missions, are currently experiencing unprecedented success in Iraq (Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2004). Distancing itself from the heavy forward basing of the Cold War, the Air Force is calling itself an Expeditionary Air Force, capable of global response, deployment, and sustained operations within two days of notification (America's Air Force, 2001; Global Access Strategy, 2002). If U.S. global basing remains as is, the Army and Air Force must face the daunting challenge of effecting time-critical strategic lift requirements to areas of conflict. Some of the greatest challenges facing expeditionary planners will be in balancing domestic, pre-positioned, and mobile asset distribution without compromising reaction time.

The Navy's Sea Power 21 vision is founded on three sea-based concepts: Sea Shield, Sea Strike, and Sea Basing. With respect to the latter, maritime forces will capitalize on operational independence and mobile sovereignty to quickly place naval forces anywhere in the world with minimal shore support (Clark, 2002). The U.S. Coast Guard, operationally validated by ongoing contributions to Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, boldly recognizes itself in its mission statement as an armed force that will contribute "in any maritime region as required to support national security" (Coast Guard Vision 2020, 1998).

An inherently expeditionary force, the U.S. Marine Corps' marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) model continues to be the focal point of its mission planning. Ready to perform independently, jointly or in a coalition, Marine Corps forces are the nation's "premier expeditionary total force in readiness," as highlighted in the Marine Corps Strategy 21 (2000). As the Navy implements the quickly deployable carrier and expeditionary strike groups, Marine Corps forces

will directly benefit from Sea Basing and Sea Strike doctrine through increased mobility and flexibility (Clark, 2002).

These visionary, Service-specific approaches seek to eliminate reliance on foreign basing. As demonstrated in Operations EL DORADO CANYON (denial of French airspace transit rights) and IRAQI FREEDOM (denial of Turkish soil for offensive operations), historical allies may balk at American motives and operations. Both deliberate and crisis action planning would benefit from a preponderance of organic bases, whether CONUS or expeditionary, rather than a reliance on foreign base agreements. As the armed services implement their expeditionary visions, the number of foreign bases should decline, reducing further the required level of American imperialism.

In this age of global reach, cumbersome foreign bases may not be needed. Weapon technologies are in development that will allow many of America's strike and response capabilities to be CONUS based. In one example, the U.S. Air Force is involved in research to create a hypersonic vehicle that could reach targets over 9,000 nautical miles away in less than two hours with a 12,000-pound weapon payload (Bombing anywhere on earth, 2003). Ideally, the United States would rely solely on these CONUS-based platforms and mobile, expeditionary strike assets to conduct its military business. Only these organic, sovereign options can be relied upon across the broad spectrum of international conflict scenarios.

#### Aligning Bases to U.S. Advantage

Despite the visions of self-sufficiency, the United States will continue to need foreign basing, at least in the near term. Paring the list of current foreign bases is not enough. Current U.S. force disposition, excluding Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, does not regionally confront

known trouble spots. Rather, it mirrors force disposition at the conclusion of prior conflicts, or strategic positioning for threats that no longer exist.

Today's global terrorism map shows several areas that rate a greater proximity of U.S. forces, such as Columbia, Malaysia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Georgian Caucasus (Global terrorism risk, 2003). In contrast, almost a quarter of American forces are currently based in Europe, Japan, Korea, and Turkey at Cold War bases (U.S. Military, 2003; U.S. Order of Battle, 2004).

Within the Joint Strategic Review process, combatant commanders' Theater Strategic Estimate and Theater Strategic Capabilities Plans should reflect diplomatic efforts to secure favorable basing agreements that shift forces within their respective areas of operation to address terrorism concerns. The Secretary of Defense's Security Cooperation Guidance should immediately emphasize this facet of security cooperation. Joint doctrine, which doesn't even define "security cooperation" now, should reflect the Secretary of Defense's and CJCS's prioritization to thin and redistribute current U.S. basing structure quickly, not gradually, to maintain a preemptive stance (Theater Strategic Cooperation Plan, 2003; Joint Pub 1-02, 2001).

### Conclusion

Today, the United States enjoys a power and influence that makes colonialism a viable option. Should the United States wish to make Afghanistan or Iraq a colonial state, it conceivably could be done, timeline and costs aside. Indeed, the United States has embraced colonialism in its past. Today, however, in light of colonialism's negative stigma and burdensome administration, its advantages do not outweigh the disadvantages. A fresh approach to American imperialism is prudent.

The latest National Security Strategy describes America's proactive vision, proclaiming, "the only path to peace and security is the path of action" (NSS, 2002). Accordingly, the United States must be ready to strike first against nations or organizations that would seek to harm U.S. interests. Remaining smartly imperial is the desirable *modus operandi* until the United States can be self-sufficient as a reaction force using sovereign assets. America's imperialism cannot employ outdated foreign basing to protect interests at home and abroad. Historical basing does not place U.S. forces near the probable adversary, and many current agreements have proven unreliable as assumptions for deliberate and crisis planning. Furthermore, American forces must be available for offensive, not defensive, operations at a moment's notice.

Without a national power to challenge it, the United States could, in a military sense, abandon all imperialistic basing, even to the point of withdrawing from defense agreements with Taiwan and South Korea. This is the point voiced by many who are suspicious of American international ventures. Retreating within its own borders in the absence of a defined enemy is sensible if the U.S. objective is simply to protect its sovereign territory. U.S. priorities go far beyond that, however, as it strives to remain the leader in the areas of technology, military power, and global economics.

The liberal opinion confuses current imperialism with mere militarism that is using the war on terrorism to establish a Romanesque empire with "garrisons" that will "encircle the planet" (Baseworld, 2004). Today's American imperialism does not satisfy military interests alone, however, nor is it a recent epiphany for American policymakers. The impending shift in foreign basing, rapid rise in expeditionary military doctrine, and establishment of CONUS-based capabilities to handle global threats to the United States may seem radical, but these changes are consistent with America's historical foreign policy. Adapting to the threat of the day within the

context of stated national security interests has always driven the U.S. approach to international engagement. Whether it involves embracing or shunning colonial and imperial policies, the United States has practiced, and will continue to practice, a progressive foreign policy that supports national priorities first and international priorities second.

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### **Biography**

Lieutenant Commander Joey Dodgen, USNR. LCDR Dodgen is a Surface Warfare Officer and drilling reservist. He is currently serving a two-year active-duty recall as Commanding Officer, Naval Reserve Center, Bangor, Maine. He was commissioned through NROTC at the University of Texas (1990), earning a BS in chemistry, and completed JPME Phase I through the Naval War College Continuing Education Program (2000). He has served as commanding officer of Naval Reserve mine warfare, special warfare, and mobile communications units. Recently, he was mobilized to COMUSNAVCENT N-3 as Assistant Iraq Maritime Interception Operations (MIO) Coordinator in support of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. In his civilian life he is a pilot for Delta Air Lines.